IN DEFENSE OF "PLEASINGLY ECUMENICAL" EVIDENTIALISM

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ABSTRACT

Sylvie Ramirez: In Defense of "Pleasingly Ecumenical" Evidentialism
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Is it ever epistemically permissible to believe, or accept as true, something one regards one's evidence as insufficient to establish? According to evidentialism, one ought to believe only what the evidence supports. In this paper, I argue that recent evidentialist arguments fail to establish that there are no exceptions to this general rule. I then offer an account of a "pleasingly ecumenical" evidentialism, according to which it is sometimes permissible to believe beyond what one takes one's evidence to establish.

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Introduction: Historical Underpinnings

Is it ever epistemically permissible to believe something for which one regards the evidence as inconclusive? William K. Clifford famously argued for a negative response to this question, when he claimed that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence".[1] Clifford was an early proponent of Evidentialism, the epistemic thesis according to which one ought to believe only what the evidence supports. According to Clifford, we must earn our beliefs by way of genuine inquiry. It is always wrong "to believe on insufficient evidence, or to nourish belief by suppressing doubts and avoiding investigation".[2] Clifford's argument for evidentialism was primarily based on the concern that "no belief held by one man, however seemingly trivial the belief, and however obscure the believer, is ever actually insignificant or without its effect on the fate of mankind."[3] He was concerned that an unsubstantiated belief, no matter how seemingly trivial, represented an unwarranted risk.

William James was largely supportive of the evidentialist approach, but claimed that in certain situations the "liberal" epistemic principle that compels us to *seek truth* may come into conflict with the "conservative" epistemic principle that tells us to *avoid error*.[4] There are some candidate beliefs—belief in the existence of God, for example—for which our evidence is essentially

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[1] William K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy* ed. Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau (Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999), 110-114.

[2] *Ibid.*, 112.

[3] *Ibid.*, 111-112.

[4] William James, "The Will To Believe," in *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy* ed. Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau (Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999), 124-132.

inconclusive. We have no reason to think that more evidence will come to us if we wait. In these cases, we find ourselves forced to either accept the hypothesis now on insufficient evidence or not to accept it. If we suspend judgment in order to adhere to the conservative principle, we guarantee a violation of the liberal principle: we give up on seeking truth. James argued that in certain circumstances, when presented with a conflict between the two principles, one is rationally permitted to follow the liberal rather than the conservative principle. When *forced* to make a decision about a *living* option (we take both hypotheses as possible) of *momentous* significance to our lives that is *essentially undecided*[5] by the evidence, the principle "seek truth" rationally entitles us to believe on insufficient evidence.

Recent arguments for evidentialism have revived the debate between Clifford and James. Whereas Clifford's argument for evidentialism rested on the dubious assumption that we risk harm to all of humanity whenever we believe something on insufficient evidence, recent arguments take a different tack, and aim to locate the primacy of the conservative principle among the normative demands given by the concept of belief itself. In this paper, I offer a defense of the liberal epistemic principle—the right to seek truth at the risk of error—against a recent argument for evidentialism. I argue that while recent arguments show that the conservative principle should compel our allegiance in most cases, they do not succeed in denying our right to follow the liberal principle in James' cases.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In Chapter 1, I present Jonathan Adler's recent conceptual argument for evidentialism. In Chapter 2, I sketch his pre-emptive response to James. In Chapter 3, I present three James-style counter-examples to Adler's evidentialism. In Chapter 4, I conclude by suggesting an amendment to Adler's argument that I believe supports a "pleasantly

ecumenical" evidentialism. This latter evidentialism holds that we ought to follow the conservative principle in the majority of cases, but allows for exceptions in James-style cases.

Chapter 1: A Conceptual Argument for Evidentialism

In *Belief's Own Ethics*, Jonathan Adler argues that we need not look to external risks and rewards, as Clifford did, to find support for evidentialism.[6] Instead, the truth of evidentialism is secured by the very concept of belief. Adler's argument hinges on the assumption that examining what we *can* believe when fully attending to our beliefs reveals the normative demands of belief: the fact that we can recognize ourselves as fully believing something only when we regard it as fully supported by the evidence indicates that we recognize and accept that belief demands to be believed for adequate reasons. Adler assumes that "adequate reasons" should be understood as sufficient evidential reasons for the truth of what is believed. He concludes that we believe in accordance with the concept of belief only if we believe for reasons that are sufficient to establish truth.

He begins his argument by noting an apparent fact of human psychology, which he labels subjective principle of sufficient reason:

> (SPSR): Necessarily, if in full awareness one attends to one's fully believing that p, one regards it as believed for adequate reasons.

Three clarifications will be helpful here. First, a person meets the condition of "full awareness" regarding her belief that *p* if she is actively attending to the fact that she believes *p*. Suppose Sara and Alex believe that human activity is a leading cause of global warming. At this particular moment, Sara is fully aware of her belief. She is currently attending to the fact that she

[6] Jonathan Adler, *Belief's Own Ethics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

believes it. Alex does not meet the condition of full awareness. He shares the belief (he would affirm this if asked) but is currently thinking about other things.

Second, a "full belief" that *p* amounts to outright acceptance of the truth of *p*. By contrast, a "partial belief" that *p*, would find expression in hedged statements like, "I'm pretty sure that *p*." If Sara fully believes that human activity is a leading cause of global warming, she accepts it as true. If Alex's belief is only partial, he falls short of accepting it as true. Perhaps he's only "really pretty sure" that human activity is a leading cause of global warming. Full beliefs are further differentiated from partial beliefs by the roles they play in our lives. Full beliefs dominate argument and reasoning, back our reactive-attitude judgments, support commitments, facilitate intentional action, and warrant assertion.[7]

Finally, one takes oneself to have "adequate reason for *p*" only if one regards one's evidence as sufficient to establish the truth of p. Adler emphasizes that adequate reasons for *p* must be evidential reasons—they must be reasons that lend support for the truth of *p*—but grants that context may play a role in determining whether one's reasons are sufficient to establish truth. For example, I may have sufficient reason to believe that my newspaper is lost after checking a few obvious places; but if I've lost my wallet I'll require more support before I accept that it's lost.[8] Adequate reasons correspond roughly in kind and strength to the evidential reasons we take to be necessary before declaring that we know something.

With these clarifications in mind, we can read SPSR as stating that necessarily, if we reflectively recognize ourselves *as* accepting the truth of *p*, we regard our evidence as sufficient to establish the truth of *p*. So, if Sara is aware of her full belief that human activity is a leading cause of

[7] Adler, *Belief's Own Ethics*, 232.

[8] Adler, *Belief's Own Ethics*, 228.

global warming, she must take herself to have sufficient evidence that her belief is true. SPSR is "subjective" in that it makes a claim about the judgments that we, as individual epistemic agents, can make of our own doxastic attitudes upon reflection. The claim is not that agents *do* in fact fully believe only those things for which they have sufficient evidence. Sara's evidence may in fact be less than sufficient to establish that human activity is a leading cause of global warming. Or, her evidence may not lend any support to the belief at all. Perhaps it's based on what she saw at the bottom of her teacup. SPSR is entirely compatible with our epistemic fallibility. The claim is that agents who reflectively recognize themselves as fully believing something must *regard* themselves as believing it for adequate reasons. As a corollary of SPSR, Adler derives the following.

> (Corollary): Necessarily, I cannot in full awareness recognize myself as fully believing that *p* and also regard myself as having inadequate reasons for the truth of *p*.

Reflection on one's full beliefs lends intuitive support to SPSR and Corollary. In my case, I now fully believe that the coffee in my mug is room-temperature, that the capital of California is Sacramento, that 2+2=4, and that *Moonlight* won the Academy Award for best picture in 2017. I take myself to have sufficient evidence to believe that these things are true. Intuitively, it seems to me that if I regarded my reasons as less than sufficient to establish the truth of these things, I could not recognize myself as *fully* believing them. I would not completely accept them as true. At best, I would recognize my strong commitment to partial beliefs: "I'm really pretty sure that *Moonlight* won best picture." If I regarded my reasons as woefully inadequate, it's hard to see how I would recognize myself as believing at all.

Adler claims that SPSR and Corollary reflect, and are best explained by, our understanding of the normative demands of belief:

> The main reason to believe that the subjective principle of sufficient reason is a fact is that we find ourselves compelled to follow it. The compulsion is due to our recognition, when attending to any particular belief, that we are entitled to the belief only if it is well founded. That we do follow it is then a reflection of our grasping the demands of belief, not merely a curious psychological truth about us.[9]

The demands of belief, which we implicitly recognize when we comply with SPSR, are imposed by the concept itself. We recognize that we are only entitled to believe something for which we have sufficient evidence. The condition under which we are entitled to believe is fixed by the concept of belief itself. To fully believe something just *is* to regard one's evidence as sufficient to establish its truth. To recognize one's evidence as sufficient to establish truth just *is* to fully believe it.[10] It's no surprise, then, that we comply with SPSR. The concept of belief comes with its own normative demands. Those demands are for sufficient evidence. The fact that we are compelled to comply with SPSR demonstrates our recognition of the demands imposed by the concept of belief.

Adler argues that the "cannot" expressed by Corollary is strongly normative. The reason that we cannot, in full awareness, recognize ourselves as believing that *p* while regarding ourselves as having insufficient evidence for the truth of *p* is that doing so would reveal our commitment to a conceptual contradiction. To recognize that one is not entitled to a belief is to admit that one is not in a position to fully believe it, which just *is* to not fully believe it. If we can't knowingly believe a contradiction, then we can't in full awareness believe that we fully believe that *p* and simultaneously recognize that our epistemic position does not warrant belief that *p*.

An example will help to clarify the nature of the contradiction at issue. Suppose someone claims that, in full awareness, he fully believes that the number of stars is even, but recognizes that

[9] *Ibid.*, 27.

[10] *Ibid.*, 32.

he lacks sufficient evidence to establish the truth of his belief. Adler construes the contradiction involved as follows: "I believe that the number of stars is even. All that can secure for me the belief's claim of truth is adequate evidence (reason) of its truth. I lack adequate evidence. So I am not in a position to judge that the number of stars is even. So I do not judge it true. So I do not believe that the number of stars is even."[11] The contradiction here is not a contradiction in the contents of two distinct beliefs. The problem is not that he believes both *that the number of stars is even* and *that the number of stars is not even*. Rather, he recognizes in full awareness that he believes that the number of stars is even and that he's not in a position to judge as true that the number of stars is even. The contradiction is not mere inability. It is a *conceptual* contradiction. It is by virtue of the *concept* of belief that he cannot recognize himself as fully believing something and as having insufficient reason for its truth, just as it is by virtue of the *concept* of square that I can't in full awareness recognize that the figure in front of me is a square and that it has only three sides.[12] As soon as I recognize that I lack sufficient reason for the belief, I can no longer regard myself as fully believing it.

Adler thus argues that SPSR is not just a descriptive psychological fact about what it's possible for us to believe. Rather, it's an expression of our recognition of the demands of belief. The concept of belief establishes that those demands are for sufficient evidence of the truth of what we believe. Thus, the concept of belief secures the truth of evidentialism:

> The "cannot" of the intrinsic ethics of belief is conceptual; it derives from the incoherence of recognizing both that one holds a belief and that one's reasons for that belief are inadequate. The incoherence is a contradiction, so the point is that *there is no such thought*, not merely that such thoughts are irrational. The "cannot" is strongly normative,

[11] *Ibid.*, 30.

[12] In the latter case, I'm not only committed to *not* believing that the figure is a square—I'm committed to believing that it's *not* a square—but the point is the same.

> generating not simply "not ought"s, as entailed by the "'ought' implies 'can'" thesis. Not only is it not the case that one ought to believe that the number of stars is even, but one *ought not* to believe it.[13]

Given the demands of the belief, "one believes that *p* in accord with the concept of belief only if one has adequate reasons that *p*".[14] When we recognize that we are entitled to full beliefs only for which we have sufficient evidence, we recognize that belief demands *actually* adequate evidence, not merely *apparently* adequate evidence. So, believing in accord with the demands of belief requires that we believe for *actually* adequate reasons, not just that we believe for reasons we *regard* as adequate. Adler offers the following reconstruction of his argument.[15]

1. Necessarily, if in full awareness one attends to one's believing that *p*, one regards it as believed for adequate reasons.
2. So, one cannot recognize oneself as fully believing that *p* (rather than believing that *p* to a high degree) and that one's reasons for belief are inadequate (yielding less than full support).
3. The reason that one cannot so recognize oneself is that the thought would be a stark contradiction.
4. So, the "cannot" is conceptual, not merely an inability, and the concept that generates the contradiction is belief.

[13] *Ibid.*, 49 (emphasis added).

[14] *Ibid.*, 52.

[15] *Ibid.*, 52.

5. The impossibility of believing implies that in first-person awareness we recognize the demands of belief, and that those demands are for adequate reasons of the truth of what is believed.
6. So, one believes that *p* in accord with the concept of belief only if one has adequate reasons that *p*.
7. So, one ought to believe that *p* only if one has adequate reasons that *p*.

Adler opts to describe the epistemic "ought" in terms of what is "proper to" or "accords with" the concept of belief in order to distinguish it from the practical "ought". Epistemic "oughts" are not given by means-end reasoning. Instead, the epistemic "ought" requires us to believe as the concept of belief demands. If Adler's argument is correct, it is well-positioned to explain why there is no exception to the requirement that we adhere to the conservative epistemic principle: overreaching one's evidence, even in Jamesian cases, represents a failure to believe as the epistemic "ought" demands.

Chapter 2: Evidentialism Without Exception

Recall that James advocated for exceptions to evidentialism only in highly specific cases: one's option to believe must be *forced*, *living*, *momentous*, and *essentially undecided* by the evidence. Adler claims that James' critique is ineffectual against his conceptual argument. His evidentialism is without exception. Alder takes up three lines of defense. First, our option to believe in the absence of evidence is never genuinely forced in James' sense; second, the risk of believing on insufficient evidence is greater than the risk of missing out on truth; finally, whether a question is essentially undecided by the evidence is irrelevant to the demands of belief.

In James-style cases, our option to believe is forced. We must either accept a belief or go without it. Suspension of judgment is effectively no different from going without the belief. Adler takes this to mean that we have only two options, and "either attitude (belief or disbelief) will exceed the evidence. Neither response is settled by the evidence. But we must take one. Since neither option is more rational than the other, James' resolution is that it is open to us to do either."[16] If the option is genuinely forced, then there can be no discernable difference between rejecting *p* and suspending judgment about *p*, and the decision not to accept *p* is no more warranted by the evidence than the decision to accept not-*p*.

But, Adler argues, the choice between accepting and not accepting is *not* genuinely forced: James has only hidden the virtue of the option to suspend judgment. He cannot erase it altogether. To demonstrate this point, Adler contrasts action and belief. In the case of action, given a choice

[16] *Ibid.*, 118.

between doing A and not doing A, not deciding is equivalent to deciding not to do A. In the case of action, the choice to do nothing isn't a genuinely independent option. Adler argues that this is not so in the case of belief. Suspension of judgment *is* a genuinely distinct option. It may be *effectively* no different from disbelief—the actions of the agnostic may not be discernably different from those of the atheist—but suspending judgment is a distinct option precisely because it does not require us to overreach the evidence. Suspension of judgment is the attitude the evidence entitles us to, whereas disbelief is not.

As Adler rightly points out, "we simply cannot make the alternative of not-believing or suspending judgment go away." James seems to concede this point: "when [he] allows that, if we remain agnostic, 'waiting for more light,' then 'we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue*,' he is admitting the crucial distinction between claiming (believing) that *p* and not claiming (not believing) that *p*."[17] Suspension of judgment guarantees that we avoid the error of overreaching our evidence. Disbelief does not. Adler concludes that "James knows that the choice between believing and disbelieving is not an excluded middle. Yet, the crux of his argument is that it should be so treated."[18] The setup for the option James wants to force on us is an illusion. We have three rather than two options all along, and only one of these is warranted by the evidence.

Moreover, Adler claims that even in James-style cases, the risk of losing truth shouldn't compel us to risk error. We resign ourselves to the risk of losing important truths all the time, as when we resign ourselves to our ignorance about historical facts for which we lack determinate evidence:

> Just think of all the facts that are buried in the past and that would greatly assist our understanding of history. If we cannot ascertain them, we just let them go, resigning

[17] *Ibid.*, 119.

[18] *Ibid.*, 120.

> ourselves to gaps in our historical understanding. It would surely not serve an interest in truth to "will to believe" those unknown facts.[19]

Even when knowledge of the facts would be extremely advantageous, we do not do ourselves any epistemic favors in forming full beliefs by way of blind guesses in the dark. Since suspending judgment guarantees that we avoid the errors associated with overreaching the evidence, "risk is minimized to the extent that belief is in accord with the evidence."[20] Even if we were presented with a genuine choice between the risk of losing truth and the risk of error, Adler argues that risk analysis would favor conservative belief.

Finally, Adler suggests that the fact that the question is by its very nature undetermined by the evidence has no bearing on the demands of belief. Indeterminate evidence is a routine part of our epistemic experience. In the historical case, we are content to suspend judgment until more evidence comes to light. If no evidence is forthcoming, we resign ourselves to perpetual suspension of judgment. Adler claims that there is no reason to treat questions that are *essentially undecided* by the evidence any differently. If the conceptual claim is correct, then the concept of belief demands that we believe what our evidence supports. We can fully believe something if and only if we take the evidence to establish it. Whether one's lack of sufficient evidence is due to circumstances or to the nature of the question asked makes no difference. One accepts *p* in accordance with the concept of belief if and only if one has sufficient evidence to establish the truth of *p*.

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[19] *Ibid.*, 119.

[20] *Ibid.*, 119.

Chapter 3: Religious, Personal, and Moral Belief

Adler rightly sees that James cannot make the virtues of the option to suspend judgment go away. But to establish that suspension of judgment is an epistemically warranted option is not to establish that it is the unique option consistent with the concept of belief. Adler's conceptual argument cannot establish that it is. In this section, I discuss three James-style counter-examples to Adler's conceptual claim: one religious, one personal, one moral. In the following chapter, I offer a diagnosis for the recalcitrance in these cases. When a proposition comes to us "begging to be believed," belief's demand for "adequate reasons" can be met by non-evidential routes.

Let's first consider the most obvious potential counterexample: religious belief. If Adler's conceptual claims is correct, then the claim that "I fully believe that God exists, but I don't have sufficient evidence that He does" involves a conceptual contradiction. We should hear this claim exactly as we hear "I believe the number of stars is even, but I don't have sufficient evidence that it is." In reality, it's practically mundane that people can recognize themselves as fully believing that God exists without thereby taking themselves to have sufficient evidence to establish this as true. Likewise, they can regard the evidence as insufficient to establish truth without thereby taking themselves not to fully believe. Some argue that faith just *is* full belief without sufficient evidence. If Adler's conceptual claim is correct, then full awareness of one's faith is not merely *irrational*—it's *impossible*. Recall that "the incoherence is a contradiction, so the point is that *there is no such*

thought, not merely that such thoughts are irrational."[21] To the contrary, religious belief is as possible and pervasive as are ordinary beliefs about tables and chairs.

Personal beliefs provide a second category of counterexample to Adler's conceptual claim. I hold a few evidentially tenuous beliefs that fit this vague description—as I expect many of us do—but perhaps none is more applicable than my early beliefs about the continuation of life after death. When my father died, I stayed awake every night until the house was quiet. I fully believed that I would catch him peeking into my bedroom or roaming the hallways. When I couldn't stay up any longer, I'd wrestle with sleep, always trying to keep one eye open in case he'd deliberately waited until I was asleep to check in. I was sixteen years old, and this felt a lot like waiting up for Santa Claus. I knew that I didn't have the evidence to back my belief, and yet the belief persisted. Frankly, this particular belief is still hard to shake. But if Adler's conceptual claim is correct, the claim, "I don't have adequate evidence that my father will visit me from beyond the grave, but I fully believe that he will" would be unthinkable. Instead, beliefs about continued life after death are ubiquitous, and entirely compatible with the acknowledgement that one's evidence is insufficient to establish their truth.

Perhaps beliefs in the existence of God and the possibility of life after death are not sufficiently *living* to be relatable. Recent research in moral psychology suggests that our moral beliefs also violate Adler's conceptual claim. In *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt presents research on the phenomenon of moral dumbfounding, which he describes as "the stubborn and puzzled maintenance of a moral judgment without supporting reasons."[22] Haidt and his colleague Scott Murphy interviewed thirty UVA students. They presented the students with morally charged

[21] *Ibid.*, 49 (emphasis added).

[22] Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided By Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013).

scenarios and asked for their moral judgments. Murphy pressed participants to give reasons to support their judgments, and played devil's advocate whenever he could, pressuring them to discard those reasons. Haidt and Murphy found that participants were most frequently "dumbfounded" with respect to cases in which no one was harmed and a taboo was violated. Among the no-harm taboo cases was the scenario of Julie and Mark:

> Julie and Mark. Julie and Mark are brother and sister. They are traveling together in France on summer vacation from college. One night they are staying alone in a cabin near the beach. They decide that it would be interesting and fun if they tried making love. At the very least it would be a new experience for each of them. Julie was already taking birth control pills, but Mark uses a condom too, just to be safe. They both enjoy making love, but they decide not to do it again. They keep that night as a special secret, which makes them feel even closer to each other. What do you think about that, was it OK for them to make love?[23]

Of those interviewed, only 20% said that it was OK for Julie and Mark to have sex. Despite the widespread agreement among them, respondents were regularly unable to produce reasons they deemed adequate to support their beliefs. The reasons they cited often stretched or contradicted the details of the case—perhaps Mark and Julie were too young; or perhaps Julie would become pregnant and the child would have a birth-defect. When one participant suggested that the act was wrong because "we aren't brought up to do that," Murphy countered, "if you're not brought up to see women working outside the home, would you say that makes it wrong for women to work?" The participant agreed that the reason wasn't a good one, but claimed that there was no way he could change his mind.[24]

Haidt's account of moral dumbfounding suggests that we can affirm the truth of our moral beliefs even when we acknowledge that our evidence is inadequate to establish their truth: "In the

[23] *Ibid.*, 44-45.

[24] *Ibid.*

harmless taboo scenarios, people generated far more reasons and discarded far more reasons than in any of the other scenarios. They seemed to be flailing around, throwing out reason after reason, and rarely changing their minds when Scott proved that their latest reason was not relevant".[25] Crucially, the students rarely changed their minds after their initial judgments. They stood by the belief that it was wrong of Julie and Mark to have sex, despite the fact that they could think of no reason adequate to establish that it was. Haidt and Murphy found similar results when they asked the students to judge whether it was morally permissible for a vegetarian working in a lab to eat part of a cadaver that was going to be incinerated. Participants judged overwhelmingly that the action was wrong, but the majority could find no satisfactory reasons to establish that this was the case.

One might challenge my claim that the scenarios above represent genuine counter-examples to Adler's conceptual claim. Adler might suggest that the conflict is only apparent. Perhaps these cases represent partial, rather than full, beliefs. Alternatively, perhaps we really do regard ourselves as having sufficient evidence to establish the truth of our beliefs, even as we deny that we do. A person's religious belief might be based in her estimation of the tremendous unlikelihood that anything so stunningly beautiful as our world could be the result of random fluctuation. Maybe we also take ourselves to evidence of life after death: our loved ones are so remarkably vibrant that they simply cannot cease to exist, full stop. Perhaps we think that our moral beliefs are indicative of truths about how we ought to relate to one another, whether or not we can articulate any plausible reasons in support of them.

The beliefs above are not expressed with qualification. Moreover, they seem well-suited to play the roles of full belief: they're apt to dominate argument and reasoning, back our reactive-attitude judgments, support commitments, facilitate intentional action, and warrant assertion. This

[25] *Ibid.*, 45.

gives us good reason to think that they are full, rather than partial, beliefs. While we likely take ourselves to have *some* evidence in support of our religious, personal, and moral beliefs, it's hard to see how we must take ourselves to have *sufficient evidence to establish the truth* of these beliefs in order to declare our commitment to them under the condition of full awareness. If we took our evidence to be conclusive, in what sense would we be dumbfounded? What need would there be for a final leap of faith? In the cases described above we do not regard our evidence as sufficient to establish the truth our religious, personal, and moral beliefs. Nevertheless, we find that it's possible to commit ourselves to full, rather than partial, belief. In the following chapter, I explain why this should be the case.

Chapter 4: In Defense of "Pleasingly Ecumenical" Evidentialism

In the introduction to his book, Adler describes his initial attraction to a "pleasingly ecumenical" evidentialism:

> When I began to work on this book, I favored the moderate evidentialism that is pleasingly ecumenical: Evidence should generally determine the strength of belief, but not always. For evident empirical claims—such as that my neighbor's mutt is on my stoop—strength of belief and strength of evidence should match. But for some other prominent beliefs—personal, religious, ethical, aesthetic, controversial—the requirement for adequate evidence should be relaxed.[26]

Adler explains that he felt compelled to accept an exceptionless evidentialism only after becoming convinced by his own conceptual claim about what *can* be believed under the condition of full awareness: "if it is the conceptual 'can,' so that the impossibilities stem from the concept of belief, then how could there be any room for the exceptions that James so famously argues for?"[27]

Of course, one person's *ponens* is another person's *tollens*. In the preceding section, I discussed three James-style counter-examples to Adler's conceptual claim. Those who are convinced that these counter-examples represent genuine cases of full belief in awareness that one's evidence is inadequate for truth might be tempted to conclude that Adler's conceptual claim is false: it's not the case that one fully believes something if and only if one regards it as believed for reasons that are sufficient to establish its truth. After all, if there is any room for the exceptions that James so famously argues for, how can Adler's conceptual claim be true? Instead, I'll conclude

[26] Adler, *Belief's Own Ethics*, 3.

[27] *Ibid.*, 120.

by suggesting that the possibility of James-style counter-examples suggests a need for amendment to—rather than wholesale rejection of—Adler's conceptual claim. As we'll see, the amended conceptual claim provides support for the "pleasingly ecumenical" evidentialism he initially preferred.

The central conceptual claim of Adler's argument precludes the possibility of the religious, personal, and moral beliefs discussed in Chapter 3 only if we accept his assumption that the adequacy of one's reasons for belief is a function of their evidential strength alone. But Adler's initial statement of the conceptual claim—that one fully believes something if and only if one regards it as believed for adequate reasons—leaves open a weaker reading of the demands of belief. Whether one's reasons are adequate for belief depends not only on whether one regards them as sufficient to support the truth of what is believed, but also on how *compelling* one takes them to be. Miracles generally have naturalistic explanations. One is not required to regard a miracle as sufficient evidence for God's existence in order to regard it as adequate support for full belief. The evidence may *compel* one to believe in a way that the naturalistic explanation does not. Likewise, the experience of strong winds or torrential downpour on the night of a loved one's passing might *compel* one to believe that they are nearby, even if one does not regard weather patterns as sufficient evidence for the truth of this belief. Finally, our gut-reactions to moral cases are *compelling*. Even if we do not regard instant repulsion as sufficient evidence to establish the truth of negatively-charged moral beliefs, we find that it provides us with the option to believe anyway. In each case, we regard our reasons as *adequate for*—albeit not sufficient to establish the truth of—our full beliefs.

The weaker reading of the conceptual claim is faithful to the evidentialist's central assumption that belief demands evidence. We are always required to have *some* supporting

evidence in order for our reasons to count as adequate for belief. After all, belief has a "mind-to-world" direction of fit. Our beliefs aim to accurately represent the way things are. An attitude that is based on no evidence whatsoever has no claim to accurately represent the way things are. If an attitude does not aim to accurately represent the way things are, it cannot be called a belief. Hence, even the weaker understanding of "adequate reasons" rules out the possibility that pragmatic reasons *alone* can constitute adequate reasons for belief. We cannot believe at will that the number of stars is even, because we recognize that belief demands adequate reasons: in the absence of evidential reasons that are either extremely compelling or sufficient to establish truth, we cannot—and ought not—believe.

We can recognize ourselves as fully believing if and only if we regard our reasons as adequate. However, we may regard our reasons as adequate without thereby regarding them as sufficient to establish truth. I've argued that the weaker conceptual claim allows us to make sense of our religious, personal, and moral beliefs. In the cases described in Chapter 3, we are able to regard our evidence as *adequate*, not because we take it to be sufficient for truth, but in light of how compelling it is. Religious, personal, and moral beliefs are hugely important to the way that we live, grieve, and relate with one another. Any epistemological thesis that rules out the possibility of these beliefs will fail to make sense of a significant portion of our epistemic lives. In this essay, I've argued that a recent conceptual argument for evidentialism falls short in this respect. Fortunately, the argument's central conceptual claim can be amended in a way that allows these crucial beliefs to be viable. The result is a "pleasingly ecumenical" evidentialism. If we regard our evidence as sufficient to *compel* belief in God, life after death, or moral truth, pleasingly ecumenical evidentialism says nothing against our right to full belief.

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